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MY LIFE IN STALIN'S PARADISE

BY

SONIA NOWYGROD

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FOREWORD!

After 50 years of silence on my part I must tell the story of my perilous experience, running from the barbaric German Nazis straight into the cruel totalitarian Stalinist Russian regime. The fact that I survived at all can only be attributed to a series of miracles. I have set down my experiences so that my children, grandchildren and all the future generations will know something of what the Jewish people endured during the war years.

Sonia Nowygrod
September 1997.
Century Village, Boca Raton, Florida

On September 1, 1939 the Germans blitzkrieged the city of Lodz in Poland. At that time Lodz was comprised of one quarter Germans, one quarter Jews and half Poles. Lodz was considered one of the most industrialized cities in Europe. The Germans wanted to occupy the city but did not want to destroy it. German inhabitants, the wealthiest people of the town, and the owners of most factories aided the fascist invaders by standing on the rooftops of the factories so that the bombers would avoid hitting them. After the German occupation the name Lodz was changed to Litzmanstadt, to show that this city would forever belong to Germany.

From this moment on the Jews of the city were terrorized. All Jews, even the newborn babies, were forced to wear a yellow arm-band with the Star of David on it so that they could be easily recognized. It was the plan of the Germans to concentrate as many Jews as possible in one place, to make it easier to exterminate them. The Polish population didn't stand in the way of the Germans in this terrorization but rather aided the German invaders by identifying Jewish citizens.

Jack, my future husband, was one of the many Jews who gathered in Brzezin, a small town outside Lodz, to fight the Germans. Amazingly enough I wasn't afraid and kept running from my house to his house, to see if he was still alive. At one point the Germans, chasing another Jew, saw me and started chasing me instead. Somehow I managed to slip into my aunt's house. My uncle had gone into hiding and my aunt was living there with her three daughters. I mentioned nothing about the Germans chasing me. Shortly after I arrived, the janitor of the building came up and told us that everyone had to get out of the building. I was terrified but still remained silent. Outside the German soldiers demanded "Who is hiding the Jew?"
They warned that if the person didn't come forward, everybody would be shot and I knew this was no idle threat. Fortunately the landlord of the building was German and he was able to convince the Gestapo to leave without harming anyone.

After four weeks of living in mortal fear of being killed at any moment Jack returned home. He had been injured in the bombing, but miraculously he had survived. The attempt at fighting the Germans had ended in a massacre. He was totally humiliated about having to wear a yellow star and decided in the face of Nazi persecution his only option was to try to escape. I was determined to go with him wherever our fate would lead us.

Our first step was to get married. One of the many new Fascist ordinances prohibited the gathering of Jews. Punishment for disobeying any ordinances was usually death, so we couldn't even get the ten Jews together necessary to form a Minyan. A quick ceremony with my father blessing us and my mother giving us the wedding ring was the only wedding celebration we had.

After the Nazi-Soviet Alliance of 1939, Poland had been divided into two parts, half German controlled and half Russian controlled. Our goal was to reach the Russian Zone, thinking we would be safer under the Communists than under the Nazis.

Our first destination was Warsaw, where we had arranged for a Polish smuggler to get us to the Russian Zone. We had little money and the way was fraught with dangers because although the Germans had not yet occupied Warsaw as they had Lodz, it was still in the German Zone.

We met our Polish smuggler in a storage room and he led us through a forest supposedly to the border. It was freezing cold, there was no food and we lived with the constant terror of being caught by the Germans. All around us we heard the screams of other Jewish escapees like us who were being betrayed, robbed and beaten by their Polish smugglers. Our smuggler was little different. Instead of taking us to the border he took us straight to a Gestapo checkpoint. He told us that he had no choice in the matter and that we would be body searched by the Gestapo. He warned us that the Gestapo would kill anyone who had any valuables on them so we should give him everything we had. Jack gave up his ring and watch. I don't know where I got the courage from but I was simply not afraid and I rebelled. I hid my wedding ring, watch and the little money I had in my sanitary napkin.

Men and women were searched separately and we were forced to strip. The Gestapo agent demanded that I remove my sanitary napkin, so in the split second of time I hid my possessions between my naked legs. To my amazement the guard didn't see and I was allowed to get dressed and leave. To this day I am sure that he must have seen but choose to exercise a human act of kindness, which meant the difference between life and death for me. He was but one of the "miracles" that I encountered resulting in the fact that I was somehow able to survive, whereas six million other Jews did not.

Outside the checkpoint Jack was sure that I had been caught and shot. He was crying like I'd never seen a man cry before. Together we were allowed to go on further and we reached "no man's land". This was a strip of land between the German and Russian zones, which was controlled by neither country. The situation was indescribably horrible. There were hundreds of people like us who were fleeing for their lives. It was December and bitterly cold. We had no shelter and no food. Our bed was the snow covered ground. The little money I had smuggled enabled us to get a little bit of food but it didn't last very long. All around us we heard the screams and moans of the people suffering from hunger and frostbite.

After two unsuccessful attempts at trying to reach the Russian Zone, Jack was totally disheartened and wanted to turn back. This time it was I who found the strength to urge him on. We finally managed to cross the border and reach Bialystock, a city in the Russian Zone. Bialystock was overcrowded with refugees like us and again there was no food and no place to stay. Perilously, we were somehow able to reach the small town of Dombrowitz. Here we had an acquaintance who helped us to find some work and a place to stay.

The German invasion was encroaching and to avoid falling prey to the Nazis, we decided to accept the Russian government's offer of going into Russia itself. As

we would later find out, we had again made a decision which saved our lives. Those who had remained in Bialystock were later sent to Siberia, which proved fatal for many of them.

Russia had offered us asylum, because it was at that time at war at war with Finland. With most of the men conscripted in the army, the country needed laborers. We were sent to a collective farm in the steppes' huge wheat fields in the Ukraine. Live there was very primitive. The straw, left over from the wheat was the only means heating and cooking. We arrived in the winter and had no supplies to tide us over the bitter winter months, nor any idea of how to survive in the brutal climate. We somehow managed to survive by doing odd jobs when we could get them.

In the spring Jack got work in wheat fields, which entitled him to food. As I was pregnant and a non-worker I got almost nothing to eat. The men worked from sunrise to sunset. Jack, to the amazement of the Cossack workers who cared little for their women, would walk long distances to bring me some of his food rations. Under these circumstances on the 23rd of November 1940, our baby girl was born with absolutely no preparation for her well being.

Hoping to find better circumstances we succeeded to somehow leave the collective farm. We ended up in a small town called Korostishev, located between Zytomir and Kiev, near the German border. Here Jack got some work in a factory that dyed clothes. Life here became a bit easier. We had a little room to ourselves and all the workers got some ration vouchers for food.

In violation of the Nazi-Soviet alliance of 1939, Hitler attacked Russia in June 1941. I was standing in a food line at the time of the invasion. My baby was crying so much that I left the line to take her home, thinking I would leave her there and go back for the food alone. Had I not done so, I would have come home to find my husband vanished without a trace. As fate would have it, I arrived home to find Jack being arrested by the G.P.U. The Soviet State Police. Our tiny room was in shambles caused by the G.P.U. supposedly searching for ammunition.

The how and why of this arrest will never be known. Stalin had instigated a reign of terror, where arrests needed no foundation in fact. Perhaps the reason was Jack's previous membership in the Yiddish Bund, a Jewish Socialist Union, legal in Poland; but like everything else illegal in Russia. Someone possibly from Poland had known this and had turned him in to authorities, hoping to score with the Communist party. Or his arrest was due to his outspokenness and rebellion. Jack could not remain silent when it came to injustice. For example, when milk was promised to workers doing a dangerous job and the foreman kept the milk for himself, Jack told him. "The bourgeoisie in Poland treated the workers better than the Communists did here." Perhaps one of his comments reached the wrong ears or maybe he was betrayed by a fellow worker hoping for some extra privileges.

We will never know the background to Jack's arrest, but what <u>is</u> known as a documented fact is that while the Communists claimed to have a just, classless

worker's state, Russia was in fact a state founded in terror. With a system based on corruption and hierarchy, where people were encouraged to turn others in for their own benefit and often to betray others just to save their own skins.

From the moment of Jack's arrest I became a social leper. No one would talk to me or have anything to do with me for fear of reprisals from Stalin's Secret Police. Even my very kind landlady had no choice but to put me out of my room. That night my baby and I slept outside on the stoop while the German army invaded the town. I saw masses of women and children running. There were few men, because all able bodied men had been sent to the front or had gone into hiding. Without any possessions whatsoever I saw no other option than to take my baby and run with the others. Russian authorities were following a "scorched earth" policy. They burned everything as it was evacuated so as not to leave any resources behind for the advancing Germans. So we all ran with nothing behind us but ashes and the German army biting at our heels.

How can I adequately describe the sight of thousands of women and children running, with bombs falling like hail all around them? The horrible sound of the screaming of those struck down, wounded and maimed. People were dying all around me like flies. Thinking and reasoning was impossible. Life or death simply a matter of whim of the bombs. My baby, who couldn't understand anything but the hunger raging in her belly, was constantly screaming.

We were running toward Kiev. At one point we had to cross over a bridge. Half of that bridge was bombed, killing and throwing all those on it into the water below. Mothers shrieking out for their lost children. Children wailing without mothers. There I experienced another one of my life saving "miracles", by being on the untouched part of that bridge.

We had to walk about 70 miles to get to the big city of Kiev. But we were not the only refugees. There were hundreds of thousands of people of all nationalities from all parts of Russia, Germany, Austria, Poland of Czechoslovakia. All these refugees were trying to escape Hitler. The city was incapable of holding all the people. There was no food or water, so the Russian authorities sent cattle trains to transport the refugees further from the front.

We couldn't stand directly on the railroad platform because the Germans were bombing them, so we hid among the trees and made a dash to the trains whenever they arrived. Getting on the train meaneth only chance of survival and there were not enough trains for everyone. There was mass hysteria as no one thought of anything but saving themselves and their own children. People pushed and showed to get onto the trains and kicked and hit others to keep them back.

Somehow I managed to get on the train, but that didn't necessarily mean I was out of danger. It was summer, women and children were packed into the trains like cattle and it was suffocating. Those who suffocated to death, mostly children, were simply thrown out of the moving car to give others more space to breathe. All this

was set against a background of desperate shrieking and wailing. Mothers calling out names of children they had been separated from and the cries of children who were abandoned.

Small miracles seemed to follow me everywhere and I managed to get to Stalingrad in one piece. Although I thought I had already been in hell and could go no further down, the situation there was even worse than I had already encountered. Too many people, no food or water and heavy fighting. Staying there was impossible so I had to run even deeper into Russia.

I was able to get on an overloaded boat sailing away. This was a replay of the horror of getting on the train. Everyone pushed and shoved to get into the hold of the boat. Those who lost their footing simply fell into the water. The constant cries of the mothers went unheeded. Here again I experienced the lies of the so-called classless state. From below none of us were allowed onto the deck of the boat, but somehow I sneaked up there. The sight I saw brought tears to my eyes and bile to my throat. There were woman, wives of officers and Communist Party officials, nicely dressed, flirting with the crew and enjoying the fresh air and space, while down below the "worker's" children were literally dying of suffocation.

The boat landed in freezing cold central Russia. We walked until we got to the small town of Petrofski. There we were given sleeping space on bunk beds set up in a school. During the day we worked repairing highways, rebuilding the demolished buildings and also in the fields. After work I volunteered to work in the kitchen hoping to be able to get scraps of food, which were sometimes left over.

Due to the lack of shelter all extra rooms in the town were ordered to be made available to refugees. I was assigned some space off the kitchen of a little apartment. I found some work in the potato fields and my daughter was in a day-care center while I worked. The child-minders there were given rations to feed the children, but instead they usually took the food for themselves and their own children or sold it on the black market. So when I took my baby home she was always crying from hunger.

Fortunately for me in the little apartment where I was leaving there also lived an Air Force Instructor. Seeing the hungry condition of my child he took pity on me and gave me a letter of recommendation. Due to his higher position this letter enabled me to get a job at a factory they made winter underwear for soldiers at the front. This factory was like heaven for me. It felt wonderful not to be cold all the time. Even more importantly I got extra rations and petrol which I could then give to the child - minders to ensure that my baby was treated better.

My time in heaven would be short-lived. The factory official, a member of the G.P.U., kept looking for me to submit my identity papers for inspection. The problem with this was that I didn't have these papers. I had burned them when Jack for fear of being branded and shunned as a "spy's wife". When I was asked, I always told everyone that my husband was at the front fighting the Germans and that my papers had been burned when I fled the city.

The inevitable happened and I could no longer avoid the official. I told him the lie I had fabricated but he was no stupid man. He took my chin in his hands and looked me straight in the eyes...I will never forget those eyes... He asked me just what army was my husband in. I could say nothing. Then in a compassionate tone he told me that he had a wife and children. Then he asked, "Would you like me to be sent to Siberia and never be able to see my wife and children again?" Again I could say nothing. Finally he said that there was nothing he could do. Then an amazing thing happened. This official became a human being for a brief moment and gave me some money from his own pocket, before he became an official again. For me there was nothing to do but to leave this temporary heaven.

At that time there was no free movement for people in Russia. If you wanted to change towns, you had to get permission from the local authorities. Since I could no longer stay where I was, I requested permission to leave. The officials gave me a destination which I rejected in my mind, because it was to close to the German front. Instead, I decided to take my chances and run away illegally to Middle Asia, where I had heard there was food and work to be found. I got on a train going into central Russia Asia with my baby which was constantly crying, because she had nothing to eat.

There was no schedule for these trains. You never knew when or where they would stop and start again. When there was a train stop, people would rush out quickly to see if there was any food being distributed somewhere further up. Everyone kept a tin for these opportunities. On one of these stops I decided to leave my baby on the train because I figured that it would be too far to take her. I got a full tin of food, but to my horror on the way back I saw that the train was starting to move. Fright made a circus acrobat and I leaped on the moving train, only to discover that it was the wrong one. Without thinking I jumped off the train which by now was speeding away. I can't tell you if I sustained any injuries in the fall. I was conscious of nothing but finding my baby. I eventually found my baby, but had no food to give her because I had spilled it all in my jump. I held my starving, screaming baby, while all around me everyone was eating. I could only nurse her with my blood, not nourishment.

Finally the train stopped in central Russian Asia. I got off. My spirit was broken devoid of all strength, not knowing or caring where I was or what I would do. I just walked with my crying baby in my arms till we came to a Tea House and slumped down against a pole. Suddenly a thought sprang into my mind. I could get my baby into the hospital. There she would get a bed and some food. This thought gave me a renewed energy and kept me walking and walking until I got to the town of Leninobad and found a place where they checked children to admit them into the hospital. My daughter wasn't sick only hungry and at that time you were only considered sick if you were running a fever. We were in a large room with many sick children, so when the nurse who was checking my daughter stepped away for a

moment I started to rub the thermometer vigorously. When the nurse came back I could show her that the thermometer registered high fever.

So my baby could go into a hospital. But first as with everything in Russia, I needed a paper, allowing admittance from the G.P.U.. I finally found the right official and as usual told him my standard lie about why I had no identity papers. He accepted my story but told me that for new identity papers, I would need a picture. When I told him that I had no money he, another of my miracle workers, took money out of his pocket and gave it to me. He told me however that I would have to rush to be back before the end of his working day, as the next day he was off and then it would be another two days until my daughter could be admitted to the hospital.

I rushed but to no avail. When I got back he had already left the office. This totally devastated me. I had reached the limit of my endurance and just sat there on the steps, sobbing. The secretary, who was still in the office, heard me. She came out and asked me what was wrong and I told her. I am sure she heard hundreds of mothers crying before, but somehow my plight touched her. She was truly a miracle because without her I knew at that moment I was truly ready to give up.

As an official, she had living accommodations that were relatively more comfortable than others but that also meant that the room was guarded and under tight security. She took the risk however and brought us home with her. She gave us a bath and washed our clothes. There was of course no indoor plumbing and doing this for us meant going to a well for water and then heating it. She fed us and sat crying herself as she saw how we ravished the food. While we slept, she spent the night mending our clothes which were in tatters.

The next day she took me to an office to apply for a job. The only job available was cleaning a printing factory. The official took one look at my small body and another at the large windows and halls and said, I wouldn't possibly be able to do the work. I promptly replied, "What do you mean I can't?..I will do anything for Stalin and the State." This job was very difficult for me but it meant getting a little room and day-care for my child.

Shortly after I started working there I found that I could hardly move. I didn't think I was sick, only that I desperately needed some more sleep. I dragged myself to the day-care center. When the nurse there took one look at me she told me I had to go to the hospital immediately. At first I refused, claiming that my child needed me. She insisted and promised me that she would see to it that my child would be taken care off while I was in the hospital. A promise that she didn't keep.

In the hospital they saw that I had fallen victim to the dreaded typhus epidemic and was immediately put into quarantine. This meant that I wouldn't have my baby with me, which would otherwise been the case. My illness caused me to float in and out of consciousness and I am not even aware how long I was there, but it must have been at least a few months. It was only when I had almost recuperated that I found out that my baby had died. Nobody could or would give me an exact account of what had

happened to her. This tragic news almost killed me. I completely went out of my mind and suffered a total relapse.

Again my survival would be due to the kindness of an individual. A woman doctor, knowing that I had no place to live demanded that I stay in the hospital until I was completely well even though the hospital was overcrowded and in need of beds. I eventually recovered physically but without my baby my life was devoid of all meaning. Like a zombie I went back to my job and my little room. This is where Jack found me after almost three years of separation from each other.

During the time I was fleeing and experiencing the horrors of being a refugee on the run, my husband was living his own hell in a Soviet State prison work camp in the Urals. Here he got the full taste of the Stalin regime. Still he can be considered lucky, because many of the men arrested never made it back to tell their story. The men were put to hard labor in the coal mines. It was freezing cold and they were given the minimum amount of food to keep them alive. If you got became ill and couldn't work you didn't get any food at all.

Jack told me that a few times he was so weak and sick that he refused to work. For this he was accused of sabotage, put into solitary confinement and given an extra prison sentence. Mental and physical torture were the order of the day. He was dragged out in the middle of the night and questioned under bright lights. They tortured him to get him to betray others and sign a confession that he was a spy for Hitler. When he didn't bend to their torture he was again put into solitary confinement.

Russia, at the time of the Nazi-Soviet alliance, occupied half of Poland. All the Polish officers in the Russian Zone were taken to Russian prisons. When the German Blitzkrieg was taking very heavy tolls on Russian forces, Stalin decided to release all Polish prisoners on the condition that they form an army to fight against the advancing Germans. Jack, being a Polish citizen was also released at this time. This was his salvation as he would never have survived his prison term.

Jack was assigned to a Polish platoon where the anti-Semitism was so rabid he realized that if Stalin's prison hadn't killed him the Polish army certainly would. He decided to take his chances and escape from the Polish army. It is a testimony to his strength of character and his love for me that he was able to find me. He was extremely sick, had tuberculosis and suffered from bouts of malaria. In his mind he was sure that I was alive and even in his extremely weakened condition he kept searching until he found me.

When Jack found me I was living in a relatively comfortable room and still had my job at the printing factory. I had told everyone that my husband was in the army, when in fact he had been in prison. To survive I had to lie to the people who had helped me even at a risk to themselves. Because of this I could not stay where I was. I was desperate to get Jack to a hospital so even though I was mortified I went back to the official who had helped me in the past and told her the truth about my husband

with hopes that she would help me get him admitted into the hospital. Jack's condition at that point was more dead than alive. Through the help of a watchman we found a place to live in a storage room that was open on two sides. Jack had a severe case of malaria and suffered terribly. Somehow I managed to get him into the hospital where the new drug, penicillin saved his life. We spent another year in Leninobad where we survived as best as we could taking on any kind of work we could get.

I had plenty of rough times and it is impossible for me to mention them all. Still there is one episode that I wish to share with you. The place where we lived at that time was located on the outskirts of the town. I was walking back from working the night shift. It was very dark and I couldn't see where I was going. I was very hungry and miserable. I began to remember my home and my mother, how she always loved and cared for me. Those memories made me cry bitterly, the tears were flowing down my cheeks. I opened my mouth and drank some of the tears, instantly I was no longer hungry.

Finally the war ended, prompting us to get out of Russia as soon as possible. We originally went back to Poland. I thought we would be welcome, but instead the Poles greeted us with stones and curses. The Polish police stood by and did nothing. In a city not far from Lodz the Polish government had instituted a pogrom, killing and injuring Jews who had returned back to find peace. We were back in hell. We were determined again to escape. More dangerous times awaited us crossing the borders illegally until we reached the American Zone in Germany in 1946. Thanks to President Truman, in 1950 we were able to immigrate to the United States, where we could finally start our life anew in safety.

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